

CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND

by
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CHAPTER I

It was an uninspiring bit of street: narrow, paved with cobble; hot and noisy in summer, reeking with unwholesome mud during the drizzling and snow-slimed months of winter. It looked anything this May after noon except a starting-place for drama. But, then, the great dramas of life often avoid the splendid estates and trappings with which conventional romance would equip them, and have their beginnings in unlikeliest environment; and thence sweep on to a noble, consuming tragedy, or to a glorious unfolding of souls. Life is a composite of contradictions—a puzzle to the wisest of us: the lily lifting its graceful purity aloft may have its roots in a dunghill. Samson's dead lion putrefying by a roadside is ever and again being found to be a storehouse of wild honey. We are too accustomed to the ordinary and the obvious to consider that beauty or worth may, after bitter travail, grow out of that which is ugly and unpromising.

Thus no one who looked on Maggie Carlisle and Larry Brainard at their beginnings, had even a guess what manner of persons were to develop from them or what their stories were to be.

The houses on the bit of street were all three-storied and all of a uniform, dingy, scaling redness. The house of the Duchess, on the left side as you came down the street toward the little Square which squatted beside the East River, differed from the others only in that three balls of tarnished gilt swung before it and unredeemed pledges emanated a weakly lure from behind its dirt-streaked windows, and also in that the personality of the Duchess gave the house something of a character of its own.

The street did business with her when pressed for funds, but it knew little definite about the Duchess except that she was shriveled and bent and almost wordless and was seemingly without emotions. But of course there were rumors. She was so old, and had been so long in the drab little street, that she was as much a legend as a real person. No one knew exactly how she had come by the name of "Duchess." There were misty, unsupported stories that long, long ago she had been a shapely and royal figure in colored fleshings, and that her title had been given her in those her ruling days. Also there was a vague story that she had come by the name

through an old liking for the romances of that writer who put forth her, or his, or their, prolific extravagances under the exalted pseudonym of "The Duchess." Also there was a rumor that the title came from a former alleged habit of the Duchess of carrying beneath her shapeless dress a hoard of jewels worthy to be a duchy's heirlooms. But all these were just stories—no more. Down in this quarter of New York nicknames come easily, and once applied they adhere to the end.

Some believed that she was now the mere ashes of a woman, in whom lived only the last flickering spark. And some believed that beneath that drab and spent appearance there smouldered a great fire, which might blaze forth upon some occasion. But no one knew. As she was now, so she had always been even in the memory of people considered old in the neighborhood.

Beside the fact that she ran a pawnshop, which was reputed to be also a fence, there were only two or three other facts that were known to her neighbors. One was that in the far past there had been a daughter, and that while still a very young girl this daughter had disappeared. It was rumored that the Duchess had placed the daughter in a convent and that later tire girl had married; but the daughter had never appeared again in the quarter. Another fact was that there was a grandson, a handsome young devil, who had come down occasionally to visit his grandmother, until he began his involuntary sojourn at Sing Sing. Another fact—this one the best known of all—was that two or three years before an impudent, willful young girl named Maggie Carlisle had come to live with her.

It was rather a meager history. People wondered and talked of mystery. But perhaps the only mystery arose from the fact that the Duchess was the kind of woman who never volunteered information about her affairs, and the kind even the boldly curious hesitate to question...

And down here it was, in this unlovely street, in the Duchess's unlovely house, that the drama of Maggie Carlisle and Larry Brainard began its unpromising and stormy career: for, though they had thought of it little, their forebears had been sowers of the wind, they themselves had sown some of that careless seed and were to

sow yet more—and there was to be the reaping of that seed's wild crop.

CHAPTER II

When Maggie entered the studio on the Duchess's third floor, the big, red-haired, unkempt painter roared his rebukes at her. She stiffened, and in the resentment of her proud youth did not even offer an explanation. Nodding to her father and Barney Palmer, she silently crossed to the window and stood sullenly gazing over the single mongrel tree before the house and down the narrow street and across the little Square, at the swirling black tide which raced through East River. That painter was a beast! Yes, and a fool!

But quickly the painter was forgotten, and once more her mind reverted to Larry—at last Larry was coming back!—only to have the painter, after a minute, interrupt her excited imagination with:

"What's the matter with your tongue, Maggie? Generally you stab back with it quick enough."

She turned, still sulky and silent, and gazed with cynical superiority at the easel. "Nuts"—it was Barney Palmer who had thus lightly rechristened the painter when he had set up his studio in the attic above the pawnshop six months before—Nuts was transferring the seamy, cunning face of her father, "Old Jimmie" Carlisle, to the canvas with swift, unhesitating strokes.

"For the lova Christ and the twelve apostles, including that piker Judas," woefully intoned Old Jimmie from the model's chair, "lemme get down off this platform!"

"Move and I'll wipe my palette off on that Mardi Gras vest of yours!" grunted the big painter autocratically through his mouthful of brushes.

"O God—and I got a cramp in my back, and my neck's gone to sleep!" groaned Old Jimmie, leaning forward on his cane. "Daughter, dear"—plaintively to Maggie—"what is the crazy gentleman doing to me?"

"It's an awful smear, father." Maggie spoke slightly, but with a tone of doubt. It was not the sort of picture that eighteen has been taught to like—yet the picture did possess an intangible something

that provoked doubt as to its quality. "You sure do look one old burglar!"

"Not a cheap burglar?"—hopefully.

"Naw!" exploded the man at the easel in his big voice, first taking the brushes from his mouth. "You're a swell-looking old pirate!—ready to loot the sub-treasury and then scuttle the old craft with all hands on board! A breathing, speaking, robbing likeness!"

"Maggie's right, and Nuts's right," put in Barney Palmer. "It's sure a rotten picture, and then again it sure looks like you, Jimmie."

The smartly dressed Barney—Barney could not keep away from Broadway tailors and haberdashers with their extravagant designs and color schemes—dismissed the insignificant matter of the portrait, and resumed the really important matter which had brought him to her.

"Are you certain, Maggie, that the Duchess hasn't heard from Larry?"

"If she has, she hasn't mentioned it. But why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I did, but she wouldn't say a thing. You can't get a word out of the Duchess with a jimmy, unless she wants to talk—and she never wants to talk." He turned his sharp, narrowly set eyes upon the lean old man. "It's got me guessing, Jimmie. Larry was due out of Sing Sing yesterday, and we haven't had a peep from him, and though she won't talk I'm sure he hasn't been here to see his grandmother."

"Sure is funny," agreed Old Jimmie. "But mebbe Larry has broke straight into a fresh game and is playing a lone hand. He's a quick worker, Larry is—and he's got nerve."

"Well, whatever's keeping him we're tied up till Larry comes." Barney turned back to Maggie. "I say, sister, how about robing yourself in your raiment of joy and coming with yours truly to a palace of jazz, there to dine and show the populace what real dancing is?"

"Can't, Barney. Mr. Hunt"—the name given the painter at his original christening—"asked the Duchess and me to have dinner up here. He's to cook it himself."

"For your sake I hope he cooks better than he paints." And sliding down in his chair until he rested upon a more comfortable vertebra, the elegant Barney lit a monogrammed cigarette, and with idle patience swung his bamboo stick.

"You're half an hour late, Maggie," Hunt began at her again in his rumbling voice. "Can't stand for such a waste of my time!"

"How about my time?" retorted Maggie, who indeed had a grievance. "I was supposed to have the day off, but instead I had to carry that tray of cigarettes around till the last person in the Ritzmore had finished lunch. Anyhow," she added, "I don't see that your time's worth so much when you spend it on such painty messes as these."

"It's not up to you to tell me what my time's worth!" retorted Hunt. "I pay you—that's enough for you!... Because you weren't on time, I stuck Old Jimmie out there to finish off this picture. I'll be through with the old cut-throat in ten minutes. Be ready to take his place."

"All right," said Maggie sulkily.

For all his roaring she was not much afraid of the painter. While his brushes flicked at, and streaked across, the canvas she stood idly watching him. He was in paint-smearing, baggy trousers and a soft shirt whose open collar gave a glimpse of a deep chest matted with hair and whose rolled-up sleeves revealed forearms that seemed absurdly large to be fiddling with those slender sticks. A crowbar would have seemed more in harmony. He was unromantically old—all of thirty-five Maggie guessed; and with his square, rough-hewn face and tousled, reddish hair he was decidedly ugly. But for the fact that he really did work—though of course his work was foolish—and the fact that he paid his way—he bought little, but no one could beat him by so much as a penny in a bargain, not even the Duchess—Maggie might have considered him as one of the many bums who floated purposelessly through that drab region.

Also, had there not been so many queer people coming and going in this neighborhood—Eads Howe, the hobo millionaire, settlement workers, people who had grown rich and old in their business and preferred to live near it—Maggie might have regarded Hunt with more curiosity, and even with suspicion; but down here one accept-

ed queer people as a matter of course, the only fear being that secretly they might be police or government agents, which Maggie and the others knew very well Hunt was not. When Hunt had rented this attic as a studio they had accepted his explanation that he had taken it because it was cheap and he could afford to pay no more. Likewise they had accepted his explanation that he was a mechanic by trade who had roughed it all over the world and was possessed with an itch for painting, that lately he had worked in various garages, that it was his habit to hoard his money till he got a bit ahead and then go off on a painting spree. All these admissions were indubitably plausible, for his paintings seemed the unmistakable handiwork of an irresponsible, hard-fisted motor mechanic.

Maggie shifted to her other foot and glanced casually at the canvases which leaned against the walls of the shabby studio. There was the Duchess: incredibly old, the face a web of wrinkles, the lips indrawn over toothless and shrunken gums, the nose a thin, curved beak, the eyes deep-set, gleaming, inscrutable, watching; and drawn tight over the hair—even Maggie did not know whether that hair was a wig or the Duchess's—the faded Oriental shawl which was fastened beneath her chin and which fell over her thin, bent chest. There was O'Flaherty, the good-natured policeman on the beat. There was the old watchmaker next door. There was Black Hurley, the notorious gang leader, who sometimes swaggered into the district like a dirty and evil feudal lord. There was a Jewish pushcart peddler, white-bearded and skull-capped. There was an Italian mother sitting on the curb, her feet in the gutter, smiling down at the baby that was hungrily suckling at her milk-heavy breast. And so on, and so on. Just the ordinary, uninteresting things Maggie saw around the block. There was not a single pretty picture in the lot.

Hunt swung the canvas from his easel and stood it against the wall. "That'll be all for you, Jimmie. Beat it and make room for Maggie. Maggie, take your same pose."

Old Jimmie ambled forward and gazed at his portrait as Hunt was settling an unfinished picture on his easel. It had rather amused Jimmie and filled in his idle time to sit for the crazy painter; and, incidentally, another picture of him would do him no particular harm since the police already had all the pictures they needed of

him over at Headquarters. As he gazed at Hunt's work Old Jimmie snickered.

"I say, Nuts, what you goin' to do with this mess of paint?"

"Going to sell it to the Metropolitan Museum, you old sinner!" snapped Hunt.

Old Jimmie cackled at the joke. He knew pictures; that is, good pictures. He had had an invisible hand in more than one clever transaction in which handsome pictures alleged to have been smuggled in, Gainsboroughs and Romneys and such (there had been most profit for him in handling the forgeries of these particular masters), had been put, with an air of great secrecy, into the hands of divers newly rich gentlemen who believed they were getting masterpieces at bargain prices through this evasion of customs laws.

"Nuts," chuckled Old Jimmie, "this junk wouldn't be so funny if you didn't seem to believe you were really painting."

"Junk! Funny!" Hunt swung around, one big hand closed about Jimmie's lean neck and the other seized his thin shoulder. "You grandfather of the devil and all his male progeny, you talk like that and I'll chuck you through the window!"

Old Jimmie grinned. The grip of the big hands of the painter, though powerful, was light. They all knew that the loud ravings of the painter never presaged violence. They had grown to like him, to accept him as almost one of themselves; though of course they looked down upon him with amused pity for his imbecility regarding his paintings.

"Get out of here," continued Hunt, "or cut out all this noise that comes from your having a brain that rattles. I've got to work."

Hunt turned again to his easel, and Old Jimmie, still grinning, lowered himself into a chair, lit a cigar, and winked at Barney. Hunt, with brush poised, regarded Maggie a moment.

"You there, Maggie," he ordered, "chin up a bit more, some flash in your eyes, more pep in your bearing—as though you were asking all the dames of the Winter Garden, and the Charity Ball, and the Horse Show, and that gang of tea-swilling women at the Ritzmore

you sell cigarettes to—as though you were asking them all who the dickens they think they are... O God, can't you do anything!"

"I'm doing the best I can, and I look more like those dames than you look like a painter!"

"Shut up! I'm paying you a dollar an hour to pose, not to talk back to me. And you'd have more respect for my money if you knew how hard I had to work to earn it: carrying a motor car around in each hand. Wash off that scowl and try to look as I said... There, that's better. Hold it."

He began to paint rapidly, with quick glances back and forth between the canvas and Maggie. Maggie's dress was just the ordinary shirt-waist and skirt that the shopgirl and her sisters wear; Hunt had ordered it so. She was above the medium height, with thick black hair tinted with shadowy blue, long dark lashes, dark scimitars of eyebrows, a full, firm mouth, a nose with just the right tilt to it—all effective points for Hunt in what he wished to do. But what had attracted him most and given him his idea was her look; hardly pertness, or impudence—rather a cynical, mature, defiant certainty in herself.

Erect in her cheap shirt-waist, she gazed off into space with a smiling, confident challenge to all the world. Hunt was trying to make his picture a true portrait—and also make it a symbol of many things which still were only taking shape in his own mind: of beauty rising from the gutter to overcome beauty of more favored birth, and to reign above it; also of a lower stratum surging up and breaking through the upper stratum, becoming a part of it, or assimilating it, or conquering it. Leading families replaced by other families, classes replaced by other classes, nations replaced by other nations—such was the inevitable social process—so read the records of the fifty or sixty centuries since history began to be written. Oh, he was trying to say a lot in this portrait of a girl of ordinary birth—even less than ordinary—in her cheap shirt-waist and skirt!

And it pleased the sardonic element in Hunt's unmoral nature that this Maggie, through whom he was trying to symbolize so much, he knew to be a petty larcenist: shoplifting and matters of similar consequence. She had been cynically frank about this to him; casual, almost boastful. Her possessing a bent toward such activities